

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Rhapsody in Blue

Gardening, at its best, is all about orchestration. Like any musical composition, a garden requires the proper arrangement of colors, textures, and form. But it also begs for a certain amount of experimentation. Why not follow a bit in Gershwin's musical footsteps? His innovative jazz concerto stunned audiences by combining a range of musical traditions. You can likewise use your garden space to blend together a wide variety of otherwise unrelated plants.

Mix some fancy uptown perennials with the brassy tone of common annuals; introduce your native plants to some interesting exotics. The important thing is to pull all of these elements together. So, like Gershwin, why not start with a single color theme? A rhapsody of blue foliage and flowers!

One of the most pleasant discoveries about using blue (and related tones of purple and lavender) is that the color is not only peaceful, cool, and restful, but it also tricks the eye into making smaller spaces appear larger. This helps add depth to townhouse gardens or tight-fitting urban plots. A cramped-feeling corner can become an inviting retreat.

But even larger spaces can benefit from the blues. A barren yard can

take on a special new dimension when planted with a stand of blue spruce trees and blue atlas cedars, perhaps interspersed with some dwarf blue spruce and creeping juniper ('Blue Chip'), which also works well as a no-fuss, sun-loving groundcover. A rather modest investment will soon screen your yard from neighbors and create a calming sanctuary.

Open areas are prime candidates for blue garden beds. Using mulch in a sweeping, free form pattern, create one or more large mounded "islands" featuring fragrant, sum-

mer-flowering Chaste trees (*Vitex agnus-castus*), among which you can introduce tufts of little bluestem grasses ('The Blues'), wild blue indigo, delphinium ('Blue Bird'), columbine ('Blue Shade'), an assortment of asters (New England 'Purple Dome' and pale blue *Aster laevis*, among others) cornflowers, perennial flax, blue gentian, purple sage (*Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurea'), and gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*). As a dividend, you will enjoy noting that most of these species attract butterflies, who will add their own unique color to your garden.



While developing your planting palette of blue and purple, it helps to include and intersperse plants with silver, gray-green, and white foliage, such as artemisia, dusty miller, and fuzzy lambs ears, which also send up blue flower spikes. The silver foliage provides a much-needed soft backdrop and subtly harmonizes the varied blue notes. In addition, to jazz up your cool blue theme, consider adding contrasting accents of bright yellow, gold, pink, and red, in limited quantities.

Another striking planting bed can be created using groupings of butterfly bush, especially the deep purple of 'Black Knight' or the rich lavender of 'African Queen.' These inexpensive, medium to large-sized shrubs are butterfly magnets, although humans are also taken in by the honey-scented aroma. However, because butterfly bush is a non-native and can reseed rather easily, people living in natural and agricultural areas might want to avoid planting it, lest it become semi-invasive.

As many of the blue flowering plants tend to be discrete, it is often advisable to plant them in large, natural-looking "drifts," rather than installing a single, lonely specimen. Breathtaking herbal displays can be designed along sunny walkways and borders using lavender, catmint, anise hyssop, Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*), or borage, either alone or combined with one another.

Of course, shady borders and the

edges of natural areas will also benefit from shades of blue, from our native Virginia bluebells and phlox species (creeping, wild blue, and fall phlox), to *Iris versicolor* and dwarf-crested iris, and on to the ever versatile forget-me-nots, which offer a low-flowing blanket of delicate blue in May and June.

Perhaps no genus of plants makes a better show in shady areas than the hostas. Often thought of as a smaller, clumping groundcover, like 'Blue Moon,' some species of hosta can actually reach three feet in height. Do not select plants for their flowers so much as their foliage, which can range from velvety smooth to stiff and corrugated. The leaves of 'Blue Angel' can create a shrub-like clump up to seven feet across. Another cultivar to consider, especially with a musical theme, is 'Elvis Lives,' although blue suede shoes in the garden are optional. "Hosta la vista, baby!"

Finally, your rhapsody in blue can be introduced to walls, fences, patios, deck railings, and gazebos with container accent pieces and vines. For example, consider the many annuals and tender perennials, from garden verbena to *Verbena peruviana*, and all the lobelias, petunias, and heliotropes in-between, which easily offer splendid blue and violet displays for hanging baskets and terra cotta urns. For climbing plants, add some passion to your design with native maypops and blue passion flower (*Passiflora spp.*),

the clear blue of wisteria 'Magnifica,' and the bountiful offerings of the genus *Clematis*, which provide hardy cultivars for early, mid-summer, and late blooming possibilities.

It is high time to forget about feeling blue - just let a bit of improvisation and imagination turn your garden into a rich and dazzling symphony for the senses.



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

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